

*** NETANSWERS INTERNET EXTRA ***

*** Number 51: Sherlock ***

This issue, Kevin explores Sherlock, a powerful Internet search tool that's built into MacOS 8.5. If you use MacOS 8.5, you'll learn everything you need to know about Sherlock. If your Mac isn't running 8.5 yet, you may decide Sherlock is reason enough to upgrade.

Although you may want to run out and buy MacOS 8.5 right now, do yourself a favor and read Macintosh's special report on 8.5 before you install it. (<http://www.macintosh.com/m85.html>) And remember to back up everything before you install 8.5 or any new operating system!

-.-.- Three Tools in One -.-.-

Sherlock replaces the old Find File command that was built into previous versions of MacOS. It is accessed the same way: by choosing Find from the Finder's Edit menu or just typing Command-F. It's easy to miss: Sherlock is rather concealed, actually, for such a powerful tool.

You'll notice three tabs at the top of the Sherlock window, because it performs three distinct functions. First, there's our old friend Find File, which will locate files on your computer based on file name, size, creation date or other criteria. The second tab is Find by Content, which searches the contents of files for words. This is great when you know there's a report on ocelots on your hard drive -- somewhere -- but you don't know what the file is called. The third tab -- and the function we'll concentrate on for the remainder of this article -- is labeled Search Internet.

Sherlock allows you to search Internet sites from your desktop. You don't need to have a web browser open (although Sherlock will launch your favorite browser if you decide to go to a web site for more detailed information on your search). The Search Internet window has two areas: a field for typing search words, and checkboxes for choosing the sites you want to search.

When you install MacOS, Sherlock knows how to search several search engines, including Excite, Infoseek, Altavista, Lycos and Apple's web site. (More are included in MacOS 8.5.1, a free upgrade for 8.5 owners. You can download the 3-megabyte upgrade from <http://www.apple.com/macos>)

Checkboxes next to the name of each search engine allows you to tune your search. By choosing more than one, you can search several engines at once. It's like your own meta-search engine: Sherlock will combine and display the results from all the search engines. (For more about meta-search engines, see Internet Extra #29.)

-.-.- Plug-Ins -.-.-

A big part of Sherlock's power is that it can use plug-ins, little programs that extend the range of sites it can search. If your favorite search engine isn't supported out of the box, download the appropriate plug-in and you'll be in business.

Sherlock is more than another way to search the same old search engines.

Hundreds of plug-ins are available, that allow Sherlock to search reference guides, news sites, mailing lists, shopping sites, just about any type of information searchable on the web. You might use it to search Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble simultaneously to find the best price on a book, or quickly search six news sites for information about the international space station.

Finding plug-ins is easy. Start with the Sherlock Internet Search Archives at <http://www.apple-donuts.com/sherlocksearch/index.html>. Here you'll find more than 200 plug-ins, neatly arranged into categories like commerce, financial, software, mailing lists, and travel. Another plug-in clearinghouse is The Sherlock Collection, at <http://moriarty.mit.edu/Sherlock/>.

Apple's own site offers a less extensive list of Sherlock plug-ins: <http://www.apple.com/sherlock/plugins.html>. If those don't leave you satiated, still more plug-ins are available at <http://download.com> -- just search for "Sherlock plug-ins". (Programmers can create their own plug-ins: information for developers is available at <http://www.apple.com/sherlock/plugindev.html>.)

To install a plug-in, move it to the Internet Search Sites folder within your System Folder. Or, you may just drop the plug-in onto your closed System Folder and MacOS will put it in the Internet Search Sites folder for you. New plug-ins will be usable the next time you start Sherlock. Once you've installed a plug-in, you don't need to worry about getting updates from the Net. Sherlock periodically checks for newer versions of your plug-ins. If it finds a newer version, you'll be asked if you want to upgrade.

--- Searching ---

Sherlock is quite fast. Search results are returned very quickly, and you'll definitely save time when you use it to search multiple sites at once. (You won't have to go to each home page, find the search page and so on.) Sherlock provides a consistent interface for searching anywhere. However, by insulating you from the search engine, Sherlock may not give you access to sites' advanced searching features.

Once you've selected the sites you wish to search, type your search phrase in the "Words" field. Apple claims that you can use natural language searches (typing, for example, "Where can I find a recipe for fudge brownies?") although how well this works really depends on the search engines you're using. You may be better off with a boring search like "fudge brownies recipe".

Press the Search button and Sherlock goes to work. In a moment, the search results window will appear. "Hits" from the various search engines are combined and ranked by relevance (pages that are most likely to interest you top the list.) Click on the header of the "Name" or "Site" fields to re-sort the list alphabetically or by web site. Click the small triangular sort arrow to reverse the list.

Now, click once on an item that interests you -- on my search, "Brownies - Desserts" at baking.miningco.com sounds promising. A preview of that page appears below the hit list. What information appears down there depends on what the search engine tells Sherlock: often you'll see a short description of the web page in question. Double-click on the item to open that page in your browser. If all the information you need is in the preview pane (for instance, the definition of a

word from dictionary.com) you may not have to visit the web page at all. In the upper-left corner of preview pane -- to the left of the banner ad -- you'll also see a big icon for the site that delivered this hit: click that icon to see the whole hit list from that site in your browser.

Back up a second -- "next to the banner ad"?! Yes. An advertisement supplied by the search engine appears at the top of the preview pane. You might find it disconcerting or perhaps downright annoying to see advertisements in an application other than a web browser. Most search engines make their money from ads -- Sherlock insulates us from the search sites, and using it would reduce their revenue if it weren't for those banners.

-- Save that search --

Sherlock could use some improvement is in its ability to let you switch quickly between sets of search engines. Checking and unchecking many search engines when you want to do a different kind of search is a pain. (Here's a hint: click the "On" header in the Search pane to bring the currently checked items to the top of the list.)

What Sherlock needs is a way to create "sets" of search tools: you might make one set of web search engines, another for news sites, and another for online bookstores. You can do this -- sort of. You can save the selected engines and search words by choosing Save Search Criteria from the File menu. You can only save if there's some text in the Words field. Later, you can reload a search by choosing Open Search Criteria from the File menu. Sherlock will immediately perform the search you saved. There's no way to simply save a list of engines without search words, and no way to load a list without doing the search automatically.

There you have it. Despite some little problems, Sherlock is an elegant tool that can be of benefit to newbie web surfers and long-time users.

==*== SITES MENTIONED IN THIS ISSUE ==*==

Macintouch's special report on MacOS 8.: <http://www.macintouch.com/m85.html>

MacOS 8.5.1 upgrade: <http://www.apple.com/macos/>

Sherlock Internet Search Archives: <http://www.apple-donuts.com/sherlocksearch/index.html>

The Sherlock Collection: <http://moriarty.mit.edu/Sherlock/>

Apple's Sherlock page: <http://www.apple.com/sherlock/>

Apple's Sherlock Plug-in Directory: <http://www.apple.com/sherlock/plugins.html>

Download.com: <http://www.download.com>

How to create a plug-in: <http://www.apple.com/sherlock/plugindev.html>

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The NetAnswers Internet Extra is free to all CompuServe members. It's available in the Internet New Users Forum (GO INETNEW) in file library 11, "NetAnswers".

Got comments or ideas for future issues? We want to hear 'em. Just send a message to savetz@compuserve.com (74774,2725).

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